

Testimony of Gadsden County Commissioner Brenda Holt (District 4)
Member of the Gadsden County Board of County Commissioners
Before the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections
“Voting in America: Access to the Ballot in Florida”
May 25, 2022

Chairman Butterfield, Ranking member Steil, and members of the Committee on House Administration – Subcommittee on Elections. I am Commissioner Brenda Holt of the Gadsden County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC).

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today about the limited voting access Black Floridians have to the ballot box. Florida has a long history of denying voting rights to citizens, specifically people who look like me and some of you. More specifically, black people.

I serve on the constitutional governing board of the blackest county in the State of Florida. We are the only majority-black county in the state. Nearly 60 percent of our population is black. Every member of the BOCC is black; our sheriff is black; our county judge is a black woman; our property appraiser is black; our clerk of courts is black; our superintendent of schools is black; our supervisor of elections is a black woman, our congressman who is from Gadsden County Alfred Lawson is black, and I am the first black female county commissioner in the history of our county.

Black folks are no longer afraid to vote for black folks who run for office in Gadsden County. It hasn't always been that way. Like the rest of the state of Florida, Gadsden County had limited access to voting. The keyword in the previous statement is had. When our first black woman, Supervisor of Elections Shirley Knight, was elected during the 2000 Democratic primary, our days of flawed elections and questionable results began to end.

Supervisor Knight increased the number of precincts in black churches. She placed precincts in the minority and lower-income neighborhoods and educated the community on their voting rights. She simplified the ballot and provided access to assistance for those who could not read or write. All these things were already in law. Her predecessor Denny Hutchinson the white man she defeated, didn't implement nor follow the law.

Denny served as the supervisor of election for 20 years, and prior to him holding the position, his uncle held the post for 32 years. During those 52 years, our county was known for its voter intimidation, and fraudulent voter acts toward black folks.¹

Gadsden County, just like the state of Florida, has never wanted black people to vote. And it has never had a problem in disobeying the law to make sure those black folks who can legally vote

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-mar-12-mn-36614-story.html>

do so. In 1876 Florida Politicians violated the 15th Amendment, which we all know says, “The right to vote cannot be denied because of race.” The Florida Legislature didn’t care and adopted several provisions eliminating the black vote.

During that time between laws passed by the Florida Legislature and the adoption of the 1885 Constitution, almost every black vote was eliminated.²

We are making strides in Gadsden County to ensure that people of color, women, and those incarcerated and the disabled can easily vote. And while we are moving the rule of thumb in the right direction in Gadsden County, we still have work to do to open the hearts and hands of members of the Florida Legislature who have made it nearly impossible to help the folks I previously mentioned.

In 2021 the Republican-led Florida Legislature created laws that were unwarranted and unnecessary, senate bills 90 and 524. The greatest proof of that is that a Republican presidential nominee won the state in 2020. During the election cycle, where many of them were on the ballot, they didn’t admit that the Republican Secretary of State ran a lawless election that needed desperate repair.

Unlike the election of 2000, there weren’t any hanging chads; there weren’t 179,855 uncounted ballots, there wasn’t motor-voter registration failure, there weren’t inexperienced poll workers who didn’t know the law, unfairly turned away registered voters and couldn’t answer questions about ballots.³

However, there were 67,000 new voters who were convicted felons and are now eligible to vote thanks to constitutional amendment 4, the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative, that 64.55 percent of Florida Voters from every political party voted in support of.

A Governor who won by a mere 32,463 votes over a black man who graduated from the states only Historically Black Institution, the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), during the same election cycle that Amendment 4 received overwhelming support from Florida Voters in 2018 and had the potential to add 1.4 million new voters to the voting rolls during his re-election campaign in 2022.⁴

The Republican-controlled Legislature and Governor disobeyed the people's will and came up with a new law to hinder access to voting by placing additional restrictions on felons seeking to vote. They made it about money. No money. No vote.

² <https://www.tampabay.com/news/perspective/floridas-history-of-suppressing-blacks-votes/2146546/>

³ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-mar-12-mn-36614-story.html>

⁴ <https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp?ElectionDate=11/6/2018&DATAMODE=>

There are currently four prisons in Gadsden County full of men and women looking forward to freedom. Some of those men and women have served all their time. They are not on probation, but they may have court costs to pay, so they cannot vote.

An estimated 900,000 Floridians who have completed their sentences remain disenfranchised and more than 1.1 million people are currently banned from voting – because they cannot afford to pay court-ordered monetary sanctions or because the state is not obligated to tell them the amount of their sanction.⁵

Sadly, I find none of the topics I have shared with you today surprising, Florida was the first state in the nation to adopt a poll tax. In 1889 the Legislature adopted a \$2 annual poll tax as a requirement for voting. On the surface, there was nothing discriminatory about the tax. Both whites and blacks had to pay it.

These legislators knew that the \$2 tax would affect blacks more because they were so poor. Although some poor whites also were disfranchised, they could often find ways to circumvent the tax. Candidates often paid the cost to entice voters. Election officials frequently "overlooked" the tax for whites.⁶

As I stated earlier, Gadsden County is the blackest county in Florida. We were one of 12 counties that voted blue during the last presidential election. Joe Biden won Gadsden County with 68 percent of the vote, and our Congressman Al Lawson easily won his re-election. Leon County, home of the FAMU Rattlers, was also one of those 12 overwhelmingly blue counties and went for Biden and Lawson.

Now our Governor wants to weaken both counties in the congressional process. Congressman Lawson has successfully obtained funding for Gadsden County, Leon County, FAMU, and Florida State University (FSU). He recently secured funding for storm shelters, broadband, and other needed infrastructure in our area. It saddens me that our Governor feels the need to punish two major universities and two racially diverse counties because of partisan politics and the power of the black vote.

Never in my more than 20 years in politics have I ever known a Governor to prepare congressional redistricting maps or create laws to void the power of the vote. Every action taken by the Governor of Florida and our Republican-controlled legislature to disenfranchise the black vote in Gadsden County and the rest of the state is unconstitutional and denies us access to representation that looks, lives, and works like us.

⁵ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>

⁶ <https://www.tampabay.com/news/perspective/floridas-history-of-suppressing-blacks-votes/2146546/>

All is not lost, though. The county that I live and work in has never weakened during a battle, and we will not weaken when it comes to voter access.

In conclusion, the voters of Gadsden County and the United States have made many gains since the 1800s, the 1950s, and 1960s; however, the strain of hate and inequality we experienced during those times are rearing their ugly heads again under leaders that would rather our political parties and races divide us rather than unite us. Some leaders in Florida are desperate to return to the shameful days of poll taxes, literacy tests, identification cards, and citizenship tests. They don't believe in HBCUs. They don't think black voters deserve a voice. They claim that election integrity is needed but provide no proof of problems. I believe that being a black voter is becoming dangerous again, and the leaders who are coming up with these so-called election integrity laws are trying to take the black voter out by any means necessary.

Thank you for your time.